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ABSTRACT

The 3-year study examined the broad array of practices colleges and universities employ to define their character and determine future courses of action. Administrators at 256 institutions were surveyed regarding planning orientations and perspectives. Additionally, site visits were made to 16 campuses, where about 15 individuals were interviewed (e.g. trustee, chief executive officer, administrator, and selected deans, department chairs, and faculty). A few of the preliminary findings included: current interest in planning has led nearly all of the campuses to attempt formal planning processes over the past 15 years; and during the past 10 to 15 years, 15 of the 16 institutions conducted or initiated at least one formal activity designed to clarify mission and goals and/or develop a clearer vision of their future. Some preliminary speculations regarding the reasons planning did not appear as successful as anticipated include: unrealistic expectations about planning benefits; inaccurate assumptions about revealing priorities and problems; and unrealistic reliance on predictions. (SM)

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INSTITUTIONAL PLANNING:
Prescription vs. Practice

Paper presented at the 14th Annual Conference of the
Association for the Study of Higher Education
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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead in Atlanta, Georgia, November 2-5, 1989. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

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INSTITUTIONAL PLANNING

Prescription vs. Practice

For three years the Center's Institutional Planning Project has examined the broad array of practices colleges and universities employ to define their character and to determine future courses of action. The study included a survey of the planning orientations and perspectives of administrators at a sample of 256 institutions and site visits to 16 campuses, including four research universities (two public and two private), four independent colleges (two with a religious affiliation and two non-sectarian), four state universities or colleges and four public community colleges.

Nature of the Study

Approximately 15 individuals were interviewed at each campus, including a trustee; the chief executive officer; chief academic, administrative, student services and development officers; institutional research/planning officer(s); and selected deans, department chairs and faculty. Project staff now are analyzing information collected during the study and preparing reports on their findings.

An initial review of literature on campus planning revealed a high level of interest in the topic. However, the literature, and practitioners comments, also suggested a gap might exist between current beliefs about the merits of formal campus planning processes and the availability of planning approaches or guidelines with demonstrated usefulness. Most writings basically were prescriptive advocacy for particular approaches based on little or no systematic analysis of actual campus planning environments and experiences. Generally, the literature described proposed planning processes, little was written evaluating the success of processes following their implementation. One objective of the Center's study, therefore, was to explore whether a gap between expectations and performance existed, if it did why, and then to develop research-based guidelines and recommendations for designing, implementing and assessing campus planning processes. As evidence from the project is being analyzed, some interesting findings are emerging. A few of these findings are described below.

Interest in Planning

The site visits revealed that current interest in planning had led nearly all of the campuses to attempt formal planning processes over the past 15 years. The findings, however, confirmed many of the doubts and concerns about higher education

planning. While all but one of the site visit campuses had tried one or more formal campus-wide planning processes, none had sustained a particular approach for more than two or three years. More significantly, few interviewees could enumerate specific outcomes or substantive benefits from the processes conducted at their campuses. In fact, they were far more articulate when discussing problems encountered in trying to plan and their frustrations with burdens imposed by externally mandated processes.

The Stimulus to Plan

The literature suggests planning is essential for maintaining institutional health during times of changing demographic and fiscal conditions. However, the reasons many campuses undertook formal planning appeared considerably more complex. In fact, two campuses most threatened by changing trends and conditions, had devoted minimal attention to planning. On the other hand two other campuses, both appearing vital and well-situated to meet future challenges, recently had instituted new planning efforts to avoid, as one president stated, "complacency". At nine campuses current planning efforts could be traced specifically to presidential initiatives. In particular, new presidents tended to begin their tenure by devoting considerable attention to formal planning activities. Each of the four relatively new presidents were starting or

revising their planning efforts. External agencies were another major impetus for planning, including state or district mandates, Title III and other externally funded grant program requirements and pressures from accrediting associations.

CHARACTER OF PLANNING PROCESSES

During the past ten to 15 years, 15 of the 16 institutions had conducted or initiated at least one formal activity designed to clarify their mission and goals and/or to develop a clearer vision of their future. Furthermore, despite limited success from most of these efforts, currently all but two of the campuses were attempting some type of planning activity. Five campuses had an administrative position that included "planning" in its title and several additional campuses had designated planning as a specific responsibility of a particular administrative officer.

Those interviewed identified formal institution-wide planning processes as having taken place in the past, during the terms of previous presidents or chancellors, at ten of the 16 campuses. Four of these planning efforts grew out of requirements to obtain Title III grants. Two of them came about because of multicampus system office planning requirements. In four cases the planning processes were initiated by the current presidents and in one case by a chief academic officer.

At the time of the interviews, all but two of the campuses were engaged in some type of institution-wide formal planning. In contrast to earlier efforts, five of these planning processes were in response to system requirements and nine were a result of presidential initiatives. One of these nine also was responding to accreditation requirements.

Role of the President in Planning

The presidents appeared to have a very influential role in initiating and determining the character of planning processes. There are difficulties and, perhaps, some dangers in trying to classify the roles of the presidents and their impacts on planning processes. One rather simplistic way to categorize them was by whether they were viewed by those interviewed as managing more in a collegial or in a paternalistic mode. Another was to classify them as to whether they were perceived to have a clear personal agenda for their institution or whether they appeared to form their agendas more in response to initiatives coming from others within or outside of their institutions.

Nine of the presidents were reputed to operate primarily in a collegial fashion. Seven of these presidents appeared to have a fairly well articulated sense of the directions in which they wanted their institution to proceed. Seven of the presidents generally were characterized as paternalistic. These two types

of presidential styles were divided evenly among the four types of institutions, except that three of the four state university presidents were considered generally to be collegial managers. Only two of the seven more paternalistic presidents appeared to have a clearly articulated sense of the directions in which their institution should be proceeding, both of them presidents of graduate research campuses.

The paternalistic presidents appeared to engage more frequently in operational or budget focused planning efforts and frequent complaints were encountered that they failed to address the more fundamental, strategic, issues confronting their institutions. Perhaps these presidents were more concerned about maintaining their influence in a highly decentralized and "loosely coupled" environment and, consequently, kept plans more to themselves to circumvent political opposition. By focusing on budget issues, budgets being a principal source of administrative power on most campuses, they probably were able to exert the most influence over their constituencies. The collegial presidents with an explicit agenda typically had their planning efforts coordinated through line officials, usually their chief academic officer. In most cases the chief academic officers used task forces or committees of various types to assist them. Campuses that had used representative committees, lead by faculty, to plan all found this approach to be unsuccessful.

When presidents left institutions the planning processes employed during their tenures also soon ended. New presidents all initiated new planning processes shortly after their arrival. These processes sometimes appeared to serve both as a means for them to learn about their new institutions and as a vehicle for pursuing their visions for the campus.

Type of Planning

Institutional planning processes varied considerably both in scope and process. They ranged from a presidential effort to develop a "strategic vision" for the year 2010 to comprehensive processes designed to produce detailed annual operational plans to guide budget allocations. Participation in planning processes also varied considerably with some campuses establishing broadly representative committees while others relied heavily on the president's staff, using information forwarded through existing administrative structures. Some campuses used retreats to clarify issues and directions. Some had substantial quantitative information available and others had little. When planning was geared primarily to meeting Title III or state agency demands, institutional research officers, or other administrators, generally took the major role in developing the documents, with little involvement from other campus staff. Such "plans" did not appear to have a significant role in internal campus decision making.

The titles institutions used to describe their planning were not very indicative of what was taking place. The most common titles were long-range planning and strategic planning. Two campuses engaged in highly operational planning, to give guidance to budget decisions, but both termed their efforts strategic planning. Persons interviewed on these two campuses expressed frustration over the lack of attention given to more fundamental issues concerning the character of these campuses and the directions in which they were proceeding. One campus, going through the motions of system mandated planning, called it "master planning". The titles also did not reveal the considerable differences in how particular types of planning proceeded and were received.

The planning taking place at 12 of the institutions could be broadly characterized as strategic planning. They were addressing the missions of their campuses or enrollment and financial trends or were seeking areas of competitive advantage. One of these institutions also was implementing a three year rolling process of operational planning to guide development of budgets.

As noted earlier, the four relatively new presidents all were engaged in quite comprehensive planning processes. The presidents had articulated clearly their agendas and were making

extensive use of committees and task forces. In addition, one other campus, with a president who had served six years and had a well developed but not fully explicit agenda, was engaged in comprehensive campus planning. However, this planning did not have a separate structure, It took place through his chief academic officer and deans and was decentralized. During his presidency he reportedly had replaced at least ten deans with persons who were reported to be committed to his style of planning.

Two institutions, which were relatively financially secure and had national reputations, both were engaged in new planning initiatives aimed at avoiding complacency and risks of inaction. One, a community college, was engaged in a campus-wide planning project coordinated by a staff person working on her doctorate in higher education with an emphasis on planning. The process involved all campus units. At the other institution, a graduate/research university, the president was discussing a "vision" paper with his trustees and selected advisors prior to releasing it for discussion with a broader campus audience. In addition this campus had just revised its annual budget planning process, creating a rolling three year operational planning process designed to help set college and departmental budget priorities. At three institutions their strategic planning was largely pro forma responses to multicampus system requirements for strategic plans. One of these campuses also was reacting to

accreditation requirements for evidence of planning. At another campus, which had failed to get a mission statement from a representative faculty committee that had toiled at the task for two and a half years, the president had created a top level administrative group to prepare such a statement in response to a short deadline from its state coordinating agency.

Impact of Planning

Project staff are doing additional work to assess the consequences of planning processes these institutions had conducted. However, the overwhelming majority of the comments offfered by those interviewed suggested that the performance of most of the processes that had been in operation for several years were rather disappointing. The exceptions were: 1) a prestigious community college in excellent financial condition that had identified, through a planning process, a long list of issue and then had acted on a considerable number of them; 2) a state university, experiencing conflict with state agencies over its mission, that was able, through its planning process, to gain acceptance of its mission and resolve a number of other issues such as improving recruitment of minority faculty (however, the president, reflecting on the turmoil and demands of the process was doubtful whether he would repeat it again during his tenure); and 3) another state university that had a system of departmental planning, based on meeting certain criteria, that was reported to

have identified and resolved some issues before the departments got more sophisticated and began writing plans that showed them meeting all criteria.

Five of the institutions appeared to have performed fairly successfully and had dealt effectively with many of the critical issues they confronted. However, their success did not appear to be related to formal planning processes. In fact two of these institutions had not engaged in formal institution-wide planning for a number of years. Four of these institutions were the graduate/research universities and one was a prestigious private liberal arts institution.

Three campus planning efforts were ended or interrupted by financial considerations. At one campus the planning process revealed the costs of an extensive building program the president was supporting. The president was believed to have ended the planning process at that point to avoid jeopardizing his building program. Reportedly the costs of the building program later resulted in holding down faculty salaries and increasing student/faculty ratios. At the other two institutions the discovery of serious financial problems derailed their planning efforts. At one of these campuses earlier planning apparently had failed either to reveal the growing financial crisis or, perhaps, to get agreement on actions needed to prevent its reaching crisis proportions. At the other campus planning had

just gotten underway when the crisis was discovered by a new chief finance officer.

At two campuses operational planning helped them to make budget decisions but considerable evidence suggested that they were not dealing with significant strategic issues. However, there were numerous complaints at these institutions about the time consuming paperwork involved in their operational planning processes, the inflexibility of the processes and how hard it was to get issues considered in a timely fashion. At two campuses fundamental disputes among faculty and administrators over the missions of the campuses were frustrating planning efforts. At two other institutions, with faculty unions, interviewees reported that union agreements and practices precluded productive faculty involvement in planning. Another unionized campus also reported some problems resulting from unionization.

Use of a representative planning committee, outside of normal campus decision making processes, did not appear to work well. Such committees frequently were accused of taking narrow perspectives, protecting their own "turfs" and failing to address divisive issues. Several presidents spoke of the problem of getting faculty "statesmen" on committees who could transcend their departmental and disciplinary interests.

In contrast to formal institution-wide planning processes,

which generally received a considerable amount of criticism, those interviewed generally had considerable praise for planning going on in units such as colleges, divisions and departments. They were concerned about the possible lack of coherence of such planning and problems of communication among units but generally believed it to have been much more effective than campus-wide planning efforts. As one person put it, "The individual political processes generally result in decisions that reflect collective interests. However, I would like to see a more orderly process." This study did not systematically examine the planning processes of campus units but the findings suggest it is a fruitful area for inquiry.

Factors Affecting Campus Planning Processes

The persons interviewed nearly all supported the concept of planning in principle but, when queried further, revealed a wide variety of concerns and caveats about institution-wide formal planning processes. One president who was conducting what appeared likely to be a successful planning process utilizing established line officials remarked that he did not believe in formal planning but would never say so in public. Another person remarked that their institution did lots of planning but "a big elephant would trample through every so often and tear things up." Many persons spoke of the uncertainties imposed by system and state agencies. Others commented on the general

uncertainties of existence and the weaknesses of predictions. Still others commented on the political nature of decisions and problems of consensus. Some preliminary speculations regarding the reasons planning did not appear as successful as anticipated are presented below.

1. Faulty Assumptions Regarding Campus Governance Processes. Some interviewed appeared to view planning primarily as a "rational" means to eliminate or lessen "political" influences on campus decisions. Their focus was on data collection and analysis that could illuminate decisions on the directions in which the campus should proceed and presumably reduce conflicts over appropriate courses of action. Project findings suggest that, at most campuses, those interviewed had a reasonably good grasp of trends and events likely to affect their campus. Their major problem was gaining consensus, both internally and externally, on courses of action consistent with their interpretations of the data and analyses. Power is highly dispersed on most campuses with faculty having a major role in decisions on academic matters and administrators having major influence on budget allocations. In addition, external constituencies and agencies have an important role in certain decisions, particularly at public campuses. Consequently, decisions typically involve reconciling many competing values and interests. Planning processes too frequently appeared to be designed to develop technically sophisticated plans without

sufficient attention given to the more difficult problem of creating a consensus on the practical implications of the data. Plans affect many vital interests of campus constituencies and data alone are not likely to overcome significant resistance to proposed courses of action. Those designing planning processes must recognize that planning is one ingredient in campus political processes, not a means to eliminate their effects.

2. Unrealistic Expectations About Planning Benefits. Virtually all faculty and department chairs interviewed saw planning as a means to justify additional resources. However, since their budgets typically increased incrementally, and only occasionally did they obtain funding for significantly expanded or new activities, planning was viewed as largely ineffective and costly. Administrators, on the other hand, were upset with unit plans that were "wish lists", unconstrained by realistic views of available resources. Successful approaches to planning must find ways to encourage unit creativity while avoiding unrealistic expectations and disillusionment. Participants did note process benefits from planning such as improving internal communication and coordination. However, they frequently believed less expensive and time consuming means could be found to achieve these benefits.

3. Inaccurate Assumptions About Revealing Priorities and Problems. One result expected from effective planning is a

reconsideration of various campus activities priorities and, when indicated, reallocating resources. Plans are expected to reveal problem areas and propose solutions. Project findings suggest that budgetary process politics make it highly unlikely units voluntarily will propose plans that reduce their budgets. Even when reductions appear inevitable bargaining takes place to obtain quid pro quos. Similarly, units are unlikely to document significant problems that may become public. They fear, probably correctly, that the press, politicians and the public will gain inflated impressions of a problem's significance without balancing them against their strengths. Competitors, who may not be so forthcoming, consequently, may utilize such negative information in resource competitions. This finding suggests that "bottom up" planning and "open" consideration of problems and potential areas for reallocation have limitations.

4. Unrealistic Reliance on Predictions. Those interviewed initially expressed strong support for planning. However, as they reflected further, they emphasized difficulties in predicting future conditions. Given these uncertainties, they placed considerable importance on reacting promptly to emerging conditions. They valued an ability to implement new ideas quickly, without delays for amendments to plans or lengthy justifications for departures from earlier directions. They appeared to seek a balance between time devoted to formally examining new directions and maintaining flexibility to react

quickly to new opportunities or problems. Some saw plans as an impediment to the opportunism needed for effective entrepreneurship. These observations suggest that planning processes need to be flexible enough to accommodate issues arising at various times during cycles. They must balance maintaining some consistency in general directions against overly rigid adherence to outdated earlier prescriptions.

Implications for Practice

This paper does not deal directly with the most important questions coming out of the study, namely what approaches should be taken by institutions attempting to deal with questions about their mission, what directions they should be taking and what are the best means to accomplish these objectives. Overall findings from the Project will be published together with recommendations for improving current practices. Other project staff publications reporting on this study are cited in our Center's publication lists.